

Opinion



As I See It...

Dr. W.D. White

I recently received an invitation to attend the November 5 dedication of the new Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. Pressing duties here made it impossible for me to go, but I felt a deep sense of loss in not being a part of that historic moment.

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Amongst some six thousand persons who attended, the program included Rosa Parks, the working class Black woman who refused to give up her seat in the front of a public bus (thereby setting off the Montgomery bus boycott, one of the first highly visible Black successes); Martin Luther King, III (whose father organized and led the boycott, and who shaped the Civil Rights Movement with his ideas and his personality); Julian Bond, the first Black elected to the Georgia Legislature (who lectured at St. Andrews, and spent the night in my home the very week the Legislature in Georgia refused to seat him). Also in attendance were the families and friends of the 40 martyrs remembered in the Memorial.

The dedication bristled with substantial and symbolic meaning. Less than two blocks away, the Con-

federate flag flew over the Alabama Statehouse, Confederate President Jefferson Davis' statue still standing outside. Just down the street as if silently observing stood the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, from which Martin Luther King, Jr. as Pastor had launched and directed the boycott that was so crucial an early victory in the Movement. In such a setting, it was impossible to forget that this dedication was taking place in the heart of the old Confederacy, in the citadel of resistance to racial change.

The event marked a giant step toward the realization of King's prediction "the South will someday discover who its real heroes are." Who in the fifties or sixties would have dreamed that standing alongside the Confederate heroes halloved in the memory of the South would be the Martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement--Black and white, young and old, female and male, clergy and secular, from the North and from the South--all standing in the shadow of the old Confederate capitol itself in 1989?

Beyond the profound symbolic suggestions of the location of the Monument in a meditative garden space, surrounded by these symbols of the Old South and its "peculiar institution," is the imaginative vision of the Memorial itself. The Memorial has two parts. A circular black granite table, with a thin layer of fresh water flowing over it, lists the names of the martyrs and the dates of their death. Behind this table is a curved, 9 foot high black granite

wall, itself covered constantly by a thin sheet of flowing water. Inscribed on this wall are the words of the prophet, often quoted by King, that he and other Blacks will not be satisfied "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

But the consummate genius of the memorial rests in the fact that every person who views it--who reads the names of the martyrs, or who reads the words of the Hebrew prophet--everyone who approaches the Monument is pulled into it. For the sheet of water over the

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black granite makes a mirror, and every observer sees reflected in the mirror her own face. Observers cease to be outsiders looking at something "historical" or impersonal. Suddenly the art itself pulls us into the moment, and we cannot resist the realization that "I am implicated in all this"--"This is my history"--"This is MY moral burden of racial injustice."

Persons who have gone into that gravelike setting in Washington to see the names of those killed in Vietnam--arranged chronologically along that seemingly endless wall, with its

flowers and other remembrances given to individual names--will recognize at once a kinship between the Civil Rights Martyrs Memorial and the Vietnam Memorial. What a profound commentary on war, and on something peculiarly American, that Vietnam Memorial is--like no other memorial in the history of humankind! Impossible to imagine capturing the tragedy of Vietnam more succinctly or more poignantly than in this design created by Maya Lin, daughter of Chinese immigrants and at the time a student at Yale University. Impossible to imagine more graphically pulling us into personal involvement in America's history of racism than in standing before that black granite stone which, with the water flowing over its surface, shows us our own face! Is it mere coincidence that both of these works of artistic genius were given to us by a young woman--whose parents were Chinese immigrants?

Those of us who remember two water fountains in the city hall--one marked "Colored" and the other "Whites Only"--and who remember the water hoses, the police dogs, the Bull Connors, and the governors

standing in the schoolhouse doorway shouting, "Never!"--those of us who never one day in our lives ever sat in a classroom with a professor or student of the other race--WE can look at the Civil Rights Martyr Memorial with a kind of nostalgic reverence and some sense of accomplishment.

But the reiterated theme of the speakers of the Dedication was that "the struggle is not over"--that there's still work to be done in the fight for freedom, justice, and equality. "Buried with each one of the Freedom 40 is a little bit of American apartheid," declared Civil Rights leader Julian Bond. "The movement was simple in its tactics, but monumental in its impact...It was modern democracy's finest hour."

November 5 was one of Montgomery's finest hours. My hope is that many of us will make a special trip to Montgomery to stand before the Civil Rights Martyrs Memorial in reverence and with determination. In rev-

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erence as we see our own faces looking back at us from that black granite mirror, and in this stance relearn the ancient Christian maxim, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." With determination as we commit ourselves unreservedly to the continuing struggle to realize equity and justice for all.